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SPEECH
OF
MR. WILLIAM W. CAMPBELL,
OF NEW YORK,
ON THE OREGON QUESTION,

Delivered in the House of Representatives, U. S., January 27, 1846.

The House having resolved itself into a Committee of the Whole upon the state of the Union, and the following resolution, reported from the Committee on Foreign Affairs, being under consideration, to wit:

"Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That the President of the United States forthwith cause notice to be given to the Government of Great Britain, that the convention between the United States and Great Britain, concerning the territory of Oregon, of the 6th of August, 1827, signed at London, shall be annulled and abrogated, twelve months after the expiration of the said term of notice, conformably to the second article of the said convention of the 6th of August, 1827."

Mr. INGERSOLL proposes to amend by erasing all after the word "shall," and insert the following:

"Shall be annulled and abrogated at the expiration of the term of twelve months from and after said notice shall be given, conformably to the 2d article of the said convention of the 6th of August, 1827."

Mr. W. W. CAMPBELL, of New York, obtained the floor and said—

Mr. CHAIRMAN: I approach the discussion of this subject with diffidence and under a deep sense of responsibility; with diffidence, because I have no experience as a parliamentary debater; under a sense of responsibility, because I represent on this floor probably the largest district in the Union—a district, numbering over one hundred and twenty thousand inhabitants—a district, rich in this world's goods, rich in intellectual wealth, and engaged in a commerce which is literally vexing every sea with its keels, and whitening every ocean with its canvass. I have said it is a district rich in this world's goods. Among my immediate constituents is that distinguished man who, more than half a century ago, came a poor and friendless boy to seek a home in this western world; who, by great energy and industry, attended with almost unparalleled success, has placed himself, as far as wealth is concerned, among the princes of the earth; the man who planted the first American settlement upon the banks of the Columbia—I mean John Jacob Astor. I have said the district is rich in intellectual wealth. Among the numerous men of distinction, of learning, of fame, is that other celebrated man who, more than half a century ago, came to make his abode with us, and who, under our fostering laws and free institutions, rose to great eminence as a legislator and statesman, who has filled many posts of honor and trust with great credit to himself and to the land of his adoption, and whose name is intimately connected with the early negotiations relative to the Oregon territory—I mean Albert Gallatin. Both these venerable men are now far down the vale of life; their heads are whitened with the frosts of more than eighty winters; and they have retired from the strifes and turmoils of active life; but they are looking with interest upon the scenes now enacting at this Capitol by the councils of the nation.

The district, as well as the whole of the city of New York, is extensively engaged in foreign commerce. We have heard it stated, that if war comes that commerce would be destroyed, and that noble city, the commercial emporium of the continent, would be besieged by hostile fleets; its harbors and rivers filled with the vessels of the enemy; that its noble warehouses would be sacked; its splendid public edifices and the palaces of its merchant princes, would be given to the flames; its marts of trade and its pleasant places, would be laid waste. It may be so. But when the time shall come—and may that time be far remote—when we shall be involved in a war, I can assure the gentlemen that the city and the State of New York will do their duty to the country. I know it is the habit to speak lightly of commercial interests and commercial men when questions of war agitate the country. It is said they are apt rather to take counsel of their fears—apprehensive, not so much that the honor of the country may suffer, as that their own pecuniary interests may be endangered. Do those who make this charge consider from what source the revenues of the country, the sinews of war, are derived? Do they consider, also, that commerce suffers, not only from war, but from rumors of war? That, like the sensitive plant, which shrinks from the rude wind, commerce withers and dies under the blasting influence of war, and trembles as it hears the roar of the tempest in the distance? It is natural that it should be so. It is the first interest generally which suffers. A maritime war might sweep our vessels from the ocean, might lay waste our commercial cities, and yet the business of the husbandman would go on—his home and his land would remain to him. It is therefore to be supposed that commercial men will be sensitive when subjects are agitated which may lead to a war with the most powerful nation of the world. I repeat, sir, that if war should come, the city of New York would be as ready as any portion of the Union to contribute the means to sustain it and to carry it forward to a successful issue; but she must be convinced that it is a necessary war, and that it was resorted to only after all efforts for an honorable compromise of the difficulties were exhausted.

At a suitable time I intend to offer a series of resolutions expressive of my views on the subject, for the consideration of the House, reciting that, in the judgment of Congress, the time has arrived when the interest of the people whom they represent requires that the convention for the joint occupancy, with England, of the Oregon territory shall cease; that Congress is desirous of terminating that convention amicably, and without disturbing the peace of nations; that the President of the United States be authorized to give the requisite notice, and at the same time it be recommended to him to renew negotiations; and to accept the proposition of the forty-ninth parallel of latitude as a basis of settlement, if it be tendered to him. In my judgment the time has come when this long and vexed question ought to be settled, and that the most certain and speedy settlement will be attained by giving the notice, qualified if possible, but at all events in some form.

The public mind has been, and is now, greatly agitated by the Oregon question, and will continue so to be, and to a greater extent, if it should longer remain unsettled. It cannot escape the attention of the most casual observer that many causes exist for continuing and increasing this agitation, if the notice should not be given. Look at the Texan question and its combination with party movements. Objectionable as it was in some of its features to a large proportion of the people, especially at the north—aye, a large

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proportion of those, too, who sustained it—yet the political prize was too valuable to be rejected; the acquisition of so large and fertile a country was too important. The Texan banner was unfurled during the late political canvass, and it was borne on in triumph. Let this House refuse to give the notice—let the Oregon banner be unfurled—let the fiat go forth—the watch-words be emblazoned upon that banner, “*the whole of Oregon, or none*,” and then the result in my opinion can be easily foreseen. With the strong argument in favor of our title to the whole, with the prospect of adding a free and extensive territory, important for our future commerce, no power could resist the onward march. Under that banner a great political victory would certainly be won; and then England must abandon her claim, must yield the whole of the territory, or we must fight. If gentlemen suppose that by delay in giving the notice we shall obtain the whole of Oregon without a contest, I think they are certainly mistaken. They can get it, if the present time for action is neglected, only by a successful termination of a contest—successful either in the negotiation of terms of peace, or by driving England by force from her occupation of the country. If we could roll back the tide of events, if we could blot out all that has transpired in the last few years relative to both Texas and Oregon, then indeed delay in giving a notice might be wisdom and prudence. If we could wave a magic wand over the land, and at once hush to silence and repose all the elements of party strife, and remove all the temptations of successful party triumph, and if England would remain quiet, and allow large bodies of American emigrants to move noiselessly forward to the settlement of the whole country, then indeed delay would inevitably bring with it the wished for result. But this cannot be, and we must act upon the existing state of things. We should give this notice, because the title of England has been strengthened rather than weakened by past delay. For nearly thirty years we have been negotiating with her. Twenty-four years ago she passed a general law establishing courts, exercising a civil and criminal jurisdiction, not only over the whole of the territory, but also over all the inhabitants, whether subjects of Great Britain or citizens of the United States. When the Hudson’s Bay Company, in 1838, asked for a renewal of their charter, they alleged that they were settling the country for England. Suppose, now, we submit this question to arbitration. England might well say that she had for nearly a quarter of a century exercised exclusive civil and criminal jurisdiction over the whole country and over all the inhabitants; that the act passed by Parliament was a public one, known to all; that it was also known that the Hudson’s Bay Company was settling the country, and yet the United States had acquiesced in all these movements; she had neither given the notice to terminate the convention, nor had she remonstrated against the exercise of jurisdiction over the American citizens who had settled in Oregon; and it might be argued before a commission or arbitration that such an acquiescence for so long a time should be taken as an admission of the superior title of England to a greater part if not to the whole of the territory.

Again; there is another reason for giving this notice now, which is based on the character of the recent news from England. The gentleman from Virginia who preceded me, (Mr. BAYLY,) said we should delay and give time for settlement, that we might “agree with our adversary.” Now, I would add, “agree with thine adversary *quickly*, while thou art in the way with him.” I have read carefully the articles which have recently appear-

ed in the English papers on this subject, and they show to my mind conclusively that great efforts are making to prepare the public mind there for a compromise according to the terms which our Government recently offered. The Times, which is the most influential journal in England, and which is considered the organ of Lord Aberdeen, the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, has been employed with its usual ability in gradually removing the prejudices from the English mind against the establishment of the 49th parallel as a boundary. The London Morning Chronicle, said to be the organ of Lord Palmerston, is also moderate in its tone, and engaged in the good work of promoting a right feeling on the question. So are many of the provincial papers. Therefore I would say, in view of the manifest interest of both nations, that now is the time to press the settlement; and if the notice shall be given, with a recommendation for a compromise, it can hardly be doubted that a satisfactory disposition of the whole matter will be made. The interest and wishes of both nations will be promoted. Though we are two nations, we are of the same family, speaking the same language, and partaking in a considerable degree of the same destiny, as far as it is our destiny to civilize and christianize the world. England and America at this time are doing more to advance the great causes of civilization and Christianity than all other nations together. Let us agree with her quickly, while we are in the way with her—give and receive fair terms of compromise. This we can do, and England can do, without dishonor or the abandonment of principle. When a nation is conscious of its power, it can always afford to act in a spirit of magnanimity. Thus can England do, and thus can we do.

It has been argued that our acquisition of the Spanish title did not strengthen our claim to Oregon. It seems to me that no lawyer or historian, in the exercise of an independent judgment, could come to such a conclusion. I revert to the Spanish title with feelings of deep interest. It is connected with the wild and romantic scenes of the early discovery of this continent. When old Juan Ponce de Leon was governor of Porto Rico, and musing over the hot contests in which he had been engaged upon the plains of Grenada, and amid the rugged passes of the Spanish highlands—while he was listening to the Indian tales of that spring of magic waters far away to the north and west, in which he might bathe his scarred and battered limbs, and come forth restored to all the freshness and elasticity of youth—while he was coasting along the shores of Florida, adding by right of discovery that land of flowers as another jewel to the Spanish crown, receiving however a wound from the poisoned arrow of an Indian, which caused his death instead of finding there the waters of life; while these things were transpiring, other Spanish adventurers were crossing the continent, discovering new lands, and looking out for the first time upon the waters of the Pacific as they broke upon the shore; other adventurers were building vessels and coasting along the shores of Mexico, of California, and afterwards of Oregon, planting there the standard of Spain, and claiming it in the name of their monarch long years before the bays and harbors of Oregon sent back the echoes of the English sailor's "yo, heave yo." When we purchased Florida from Spain, we purchased also all the territory on the Pacific belonging to her north of the 42d parallel. We obtained the Spanish title, not by conquest, not by violence, not at the point of the bayonet; we wrested it not from Spain under threats of force, but we obtained it by peaceful negotiation, and on the payment of a full and adequate consideration.

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If Spain did not perfect her title by full and complete occupation, as she did in most of her other colonial possessions on this continent, yet she always insisted upon her rights to the country as the first discoverer, and she watched over the whole Pacific coast with a restless and jealous eye. Her title, if not under the law of nations exclusive, was far better than that of any other nation. The country, if not settled entire, was early occupied in part by her citizens. The convention of 1790, with England, recognised her rights, and by that convention the sovereignty over the territory was to remain in abeyance. The discoveries which England made between 1790 and 1796, when the convention was terminated by a war between Spain and England, could not enure to the sole benefit of England; to that convention the United States were not a party. The discovery by Grey of the mouth of the Columbia, in 1792; the subsequent exploration of the sources of the Columbia, and the vast valley which it drains, by Lewis and Clark, and the settlement by Mr. Astor near the mouth of the river, were made under no treaty or convention which should give the benefit of such discoveries and explorations to an adverse party. They were for the benefit of the United States alone. If you add to these the Spanish title, founded on discovery and partial settlement, and which was fairly purchased, the claim of the United States to the Oregon territory, if it can not be considered exclusive, seems to me to be far better than that of England.

Still, I think it cannot be affirmed, with certainty, that England has no rights. In this opinion I concur with the gentleman from Virginia, (Mr. BAYLY,) who has just taken his seat. If our claim be the best, it does not follow that England has no rights. It does not follow, either in justice or equity, that she has no rights, though our claim may be paramount to hers. Admitting that the rights acquired by England from Spain in 1790 had been abrogated by the subsequent war in 1796, and that the discoveries made between the two periods did not enure to the benefit of England; admitting that the treaty of 1816 revived only the commercial treaties relating to the direct trade between Great Britain and Spain, and not the trade with the Spanish colonies, which is understood to be the construction which the English ministry recently put upon the treaty of 1816, still it does not follow that England has no rights. Such controversies are not to be decided by the strict rules of law which might govern in an action of ejectment between two individuals, where the title to a tract of land is involved; far other and more liberal views should be taken, and far different rules must regulate the actions and decisions of powerful nations.

Nations, in their intercourse with each other, must be *just* if they are not *generous*. If the argument be sound, that we are destined, in the ordinary course of things, to occupy all of North America, how long would it be, after we have planted the American flag, and established American institutions along the line of the 49th parallel, before the residue of the territory would be given to us by that same inevitable destiny? When it shall be ripe for the harvest, the sickle of American institutions can gather it in. As I have said, the time has come for giving the notice; and it seems to me that it will be a measure of peace, especially if accompanied by the suggestion that we are still willing to negotiate for that boundary.

My friend from Pennsylvania (Mr. LEVIN) has said, that this is an American question—a Native American question—and to some extent it may be so. It may be well, while we are debating the question of our destiny—

of the integrity of our soil—to consider also, whether we ought not so to legislate, as to render the character and views of our people more homogeneous—to do all that we can to Americanize them. I confess that I heard with regret the avowal upon this floor, that persons of foreign birth ought to be preferred to those born upon the soil. I cannot concur in such a sentiment. I value too highly my American birthright, to barter it for political preferment; I would not sell it for a mess of pottage. When the great apostle to the Gentiles learned from the Roman centurion, that with a great price he had purchased his freedom as a Roman citizen, the reply of the apostle was, “but I was born free.” He spoke of himself—not as a soldier of the cross, not as a freeman whom the truth had made free—but he spoke of himself as a free born citizen of that great empire which had spread itself over so great a part of the then known world; which had planted its eagle banner alike upon the banks of the Euphrates, the Danube, and the Rhine—at the cataracts of the Nile, and along the shores of the western ocean; and in view of this great empire, with all her power and temporal glory, he who said he would not boast, save in the cross of his Redeemer, yet gave utterance to the expression, “but I was free born.”

We have heard, Mr. Chairman, in the course of this debate, much of the extent and power of our own fair land, and my own blood warms in the contemplation. It is a noble land. The waves of the stormy Atlantic beat on the one side, and the billows of the Pacific sing their lullaby on the other; the rays of the morning sun sparkle and play on the chrysalis ice of our northern lakes, and when the same sun goes down, the cotton tree and the magnolia cast their long lines of shade over the dark and turbid waters of the Mississippi; and over all this land the eagle standard of our Union floats, or will float, when this Oregon question shall be settled. I would that throughout its length and breadth one universal shout might go up—“but I was free born.” I speak not so much in reference to existing institutions, recognised by the constitution of the country; over that institution which shadows a part of our land we have no power, save that of moral suasion. But I would that those who regulate the legislation of the country, might feel the importance of those who exercise the elective franchise—who make and unmake rulers and legislators—being, if not freeborn, at least by study and long experience after their emancipation from foreign despotic powers, well qualified for the discharge of the high and responsible duties of an American citizen, that they should be permanently identified with the country and its institutions.

I recollect, many years ago, listening to the recital of an eloquent Indian chief, who came here to the capitol of the nation to ask protection for himself and for his people. I knew the history of his own and his people's wrongs. He spoke of the efforts which he had made to obtain redress, though in vain; and in his own beautiful and expressive language he added, “I knocked, and knocked, and knocked, at the door of the President's mansion, and asked for protection, but my voice was borne away down Pennsylvania avenue and lost.”

Sir, I could not but think of this appeal of the Indian chief, when a few weeks since the few representatives sent here by the Native American party, asked of this House the privilege of being heard, through a select committee, on the subject which they have so deeply at heart. Their appeal to the magnanimity of this House was disregarded, and their voices were borne

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away and lost. I hope on another occasion to bring my views on this subject before the House, and to show that we are no enemies to our foreign population as such, that we would take away none of the rights that they now enjoy as naturalized citizens; that all legislation on the subject should have reference solely to those who shall hereafter come to the country; and that there is a well-founded belief that these measures would tend, in the end, to the permanent well-being of the immigrant himself. I have spoken, in the commencement of these remarks, of two distinguished foreigners, and I could add a long list of men who have shed honor on this the land of their adoption. No man will more freely accord to them the meed of praise than myself. I would that all our immigrant population brought with them, or should afterwards acquire, such sterling principles, and such knowledge of the laws and institutions of the country of which they become citizens.

Pardon, sir, this long digression. On this occasion, and on the great question before the House, I belong to no party but that of the country. I rejoice that no party lines are drawn, and all feel themselves free to act as they may deem the best interests of the country require. With many others, I believe that the proposed notice will bring a settlement, and all the attendant train of peace. Sincerely do I believe so, if the tone of the notice shall be conciliatory, and such as becomes a great people, conscious of their power, and of their position among the leading nations of the earth. I wish to see all causes for future ruptures ended, that we may hear no more, if possible, of wars and rumors of wars. But if after we have done all that we can to secure a peaceable termination of pending difficulties, war shall come, then the nation will be united, I trust, as one man, feeling that we are right in the approbation of our own consciences; right in the intelligent judgment of mankind; and right, if war is ever right, in the eye of him who regulates the destinies of nations, and controls the affairs of the individual man.